The Civic Achievement Gap: Why poor and minority students are disproportionately disengaged in civic life – and what can be done about it.

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"No black person is going to become president in my lifetime," Donte[*] asserted with unassailable confidence. It was February 1999, and my eighth-grade U.S. History class was, as usual, trying to direct the conversation away from my planned lesson. Because I was curious about Donte's reasons for making this assertion, though, I took the bait.

"Why?" I asked. "You think that racism and prejudice are just too great?"

"Naw!" Donte responded. "Black people are just too lazy and too stupid! I mean, look, who are all the poor people in the United States? Black people! Look around this classroom! We're all poor, and who are we? Mostly black! And think about how many of us are failing—might not even graduate…"

"Donte, I can't believe you're saying that!" India bristled. "<u>You</u> may be lazy, but a lot of the others of us aren't, and anyway you know you're not stupid, and neither am I. I think there might be a black president in our lifetime; even if there's not, it's not because we're too lazy and stupid."

"Did you know that middle-class blacks outnumber poor blacks in the US?" I added. "Also, there are more poor whites than poor blacks in the US."

"You wrong, Dr. Levinson. All the blacks I know are poor. And I know there aren't more poor whites than poor blacks!"

"Just look at reality," Jose concurred. "Who's in this school? Blacks, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans… I mean, yeah, Rita is in our class, but she's like an honorary black person." Many of the other students nodded, and Rita, a white, Jewish girl from the neighborhood, smiled. "You can't tell me there are all these poor whites and rich blacks around who we just don't see."

"No, it's true," I persisted.

"Anyhow," Jamal said dismissively, "you don't see anybody black running for president."

"No, there is an African American man running for president this year," I responded. "Alan Keyes. He's running in the Republican primary against John McCain, George Bush, Steve Forbes, and the rest of them."

"Dr. Levinson, do you think that Alan Keyes will be assassinated?" Andrew interjected.

When I first started teaching, I would have been blindsided by such a question, but by a few years in, I had learned enough about how my students thought about politics that I wasn't surprised. "Are you asking that, Andrew, because you're afraid that powerful black politicians are likely to be assassinated?"

"Sure," Andrew responded. "I mean, look at Ron Brown, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X. And you know why Colin Powell didn't run for president. His wife wouldn't let him, because she knew he'd get killed, too…"

This discussion, which took place in my class at the McCormack Middle School in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston[**], is representative of numerous discussions I've had with my students over six years of teaching in overwhelmingly minority and poor urban schools in Atlanta and Boston. My students have explained to me (a white, obviously middle class woman) in immense detail how and why minorities and poor people are both personally deficient (lazy, stupid, etc.) and socially and politically marginalized, discriminated against, and even killed if they threaten to become too powerful.

My students are, on the whole, intensely mistrustful of governmental representatives and institutions, of wealthy and/or white people—and even, as Donte's comments made clear, of members of their own communities. Like Hispanic and African American youth nationally, they doubt both their own ability to make a difference in society (what scholars call internal political efficacy) and society's likelihood of allowing them to make a difference even if they were to try to do so (what scholars call external political efficacy). In this, they (unsurprisingly) reflect the attitudes held by adults with whom they live: numerous studies have shown that poor and non-white adults have much lower levels of social and political trust, as well as political efficacy, than middle class or wealthy and white adults.

Although a healthy sense of mistrust can be good—it inspires citizens to be vigilant in monitoring wrongdoing and fighting for justice—too great a sense of mistrust can be disabling. It can cause people to decide *not* to get involved, because "what difference would it make, anyway?", and it can discourage people from taking any risks at all in the name of personal safety. Indeed, there is a great deal of evidence that this kind of mistrust depresses individuals' levels of civic engagement across the board by inspiring cynicism, defeatism, disillusionment, and withdrawal.

This outcome runs counter to our understanding of what it means to be a "competent and responsible citizen." As *The Civic Mission of Schools* puts it, citizens should be "informed and thoughtful," have "moral and civic virtues," participate in one's community, and "act politically by having the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes." Essentially, this conception of citizenship emphasizes the importance of civic *knowledge, skills, attitudes,* and *behaviors*. On all of these measures, however, there is a profound civic achievement gap between poor, minority, and immigrant youth and adults, on the one hand, and middle-class or wealthy, white, and native-born youth and adults, on the other. For example:

- As early as fourth grade, African-American, Hispanic, and poor students perform worse on the civics test of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than white, Asian, and middle-class students. Similar disparities appear in American ninth graders' scores on a recent international test of civic knowledge and skills.
- In a comprehensive study of adults' civic and political knowledge, political scientists Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter conclusively demonstrate that "men are more informed than women; whites are more informed than blacks; those with higher incomes are more informed than those with lower incomes; and older citizens are more informed than younger ones."
- For both youth and adults, individuals' race and class correlate with huge gaps —"chasms," in the words of scholars Robert Smith and Richard Seltzer—in their trust in government, trust in each other, and their sense of political and personal efficacy.
- In the presidential election of 2000, Hispanic and Asian voting-age citizens voted at a rate only two-thirds that of eligible whites, while poor people voted at barely half the rate of middle class and wealthy people.
- Hispanics are less politically involved than whites and blacks according to a wide variety of measures; Hispanic young adults (ages 18–24) in particular have much lower rates of voter registration and community involvement than their white and black peers.
- People who earn over $75,000 annually are politically active at up to *six times* the rate of people who earn under $15,000, whether measured by working for a campaign, serving on the board of an organization, or even such relatively low-cost actions as participating in protests or contacting officials.

These ethnoracial-, class-, and immigration-based disparities in political knowledge, skills, attitudes, and involvement are neither morally acceptable nor politically tenable for maintaining a legitimate democratic system. Changes must be made.

Narrowing the Civic Achievement Gap

How can schools help reduce the civic achievement gap, and hence help promote true civic and political equality for all Americans? Educators, schools, and policy makers can take three steps:

1. **Restore civic education to the curriculum.** The precipitous decline in the number, range, and frequency of civics courses offered in US elementary and high schools must to be reversed.
2. **Make civic education *experiential*.** Students—especially poor, minority, and immigrant students—need to experience, not just read about, meaningful and successful civic and political participation.
3. **Teach an *empowering* curriculum** that explicitly acknowledges both the impediments faced by and the opportunities available to poor, minority, and immigrant youth in the United States, and that teaches specific techniques for overcoming these impediments.

Taken together, these reforms will reduce the civic achievement gap by enabling all students to develop positive, forward-looking attitudes that simultaneously "keep it real" and encourage high levels of civic knowledge, skills, and actual engagement.

Restore civic education to the curriculum. The civic achievement gap will never be reduced unless we actually start teaching civics again in our public schools. There is ample evidence that civic education improves civic outcomes, but resources devoted to it have dropped markedly over the past 30 or 40 years—especially in schools serving minority students. In the 1960s, students regularly took as many as three civics courses in high school, including civics, democracy, and government; now students tend to take only one—government—and that only in the 12th grade, by which point many poor and minority students have, sadly, already dropped out.

The national emphasis on reading, mathematics, and eventually science motivated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 threatens further to reduce the attention paid to social studies. A recent survey by the Council for Basic Education showed that almost half of the principals in high-minority elementary schools reported reducing the amount of social studies instructional time since 2000 in deference to the need to increase student achievement in reading, writing, math, and science. In my own school this coming year, students will take social studies for only a semester instead of a year because of increased time allocated to English and math. Happily, this trend has not yet afflicted most high schools. If we want to narrow

the civic achievement gap, though, especially by increasing poor, minority, and immigrant students' civic knowledge and skills, then civic education must begin in elementary schools and be a regular part of education K-12 (and beyond).

Make civic education *experiential*. Civic education should not, however, be interpreted to mean just learning *about* history and government—as important as it is to do so. Rather, civic education needs to become a living part of the school, so that students have the opportunity regularly to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities. Civic education at its heart must be about active participation, not passive observation.

As Donte, Jose, and Andrew demonstrated in our class discussion, students don't enter the classroom as blank slates, willing to accept whatever story about American politics, government, and opportunity that schools try to teach. Rather, they come in with views of their own, gleaned from family, neighbors, community leaders, the media, and probably most importantly, their own direct experience. Donte and Jose *knew* that most black people but only a few white people are poor because that is what they saw; hence, my claims to the contrary were roundly rejected as being merely a "teacher fact" that was out of touch with the way things really were. Similarly, Andrew *knew* that minorities—especially African Americans—who gained political power were likely to be assassinated, just as my students the following year *knew* that transit police officers are never to be trusted or that it is pointless to advocate for more resources for our school because nobody in government cares about them anyway. In order to change students' minds about the *opportunities* provided by civic and political engagement, and not just focus on the impediments or even dangers, we need to give them positive, real-world civic and political experiences.

In practice, experiential civic education can take a huge variety of forms, including activities within classrooms and schools as well as those beyond school walls. Students may serve on the school site council or diversity committee. They may interview local leaders about their accomplishments, the challenges they face, and what motivates them to keep on working for what they believe in. After conducting a "constituent survey" of their peers, students may work together as a class to develop and implement a strategy to improve the quality of food in the school cafeteria. Students may debate current events and then write a letter expressing their opinions to a government official or the newspaper. They can participate in a mock trial, conduct a voter registration drive in the school parking lot or before PTA meetings, or create a Webquest about a policy issue that matters to them. An ambitious teacher may help students research a public policy issue and then make a

PowerPoint presentation to local officials, or attend a city council meeting as advocates for their position. Closer to home, students can elect class officers who will collaborate with the teacher on planning field trips and other special activities. Or they may as a class deliberate about and vote on issues including due dates for major projects, the order in which to read class novels, or the consequences for minor disciplinary infractions.

Research uniformly supports the efficacy of these kinds of active civic learning approaches. Done well, experiential civic education can:

- help students learn and apply a broad range of civic knowledge, develop a number of civic skills, embrace positive civic attitudes, and practice important civic behaviors.
- promote an active, explicitly political conception of citizenship.
- demonstrate the power of collective action and collaboration.
- help students make contacts with adults and role models in the community, as well as help the participating organizations and institutions themselves.
- motivate students to become civically engaged in the future by contributing to their sense of empowerment and agency, connecting them to adults and peers who model civically engaged behavior, and enabling them to use their knowledge and skills to achieve concrete results.
- reinforce (or generate) adults' sense of connection to and responsibility and respect for the younger generation.

These are all extremely important civic outcomes.

Teach an empowering curriculum that is explicit about opportunities and impediments facing students. In the context of providing these experiences, schools need to be forthright with students about both the opportunities they have and the obstacles they face. In the latter case, schools must teach students the tools that will help them overcome these obstacles. This is the third component of reducing the civic achievement gap. Depending on the setting and the circumstances, such tools may include speaking Standard American English, dressing according to mainstream norms (no baggy pants or do-rags), and following the cultural practices of those in power—for example, looking a city councilor in the eye when speaking to her, which is exactly opposite of how my African American students in Atlanta and my Vietnamese students in Boston have been taught by their families to show respect. Although it takes sensitivity and care, teachers and schools can do this in a way that demonstrates respect for students' own cultural traditions and community norms while simultaneously

teaching students the knowledge and skills necessary for broader civic and political empowerment.

As schools put these reforms into place, they will provide students with a set of powerful civic experiences that are likely to increase their sense of personal and political efficacy and trust, and hence inspire their acquisition of civic knowledge and skills as well as continued productive participation. In doing so, schools will also help strengthen local communities, both via the direct work that students accomplish and by building a new generation of mobilized, empowered adults.

Furthermore, reducing the civic achievement gap strengthens democracy. It broadens government's representativeness, increases its responsiveness to diverse individuals and communities, and thereby also reinforces its political legitimacy in the eyes of historically disenfranchised community members. It strengthens schools, as students turn their attention to solving problems collaboratively as opposed to fighting against the system or just checking out. And finally, it promotes civic and political equality and fairness—ideals that are central to our American democracy. These are goals all schools can and should embrace.

*Names of all students have been changed to protect their identity.
** This conversation has been reconstructed from memory; it is not a verbatim transcript.

Resources

Center for Civic Education. www.civiced.org

Constitutional Rights Foundation. www.crf-usa.org/programs.html

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Workable Peace. www.workablepeace.org